

## The Composition of the College of Commissioners: patterns of delegation

Döring, Holger

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# The Composition of the College of Commissioners

## Patterns of Delegation

◆ **Holger Döring**

*Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Germany*

### ABSTRACT

Recent theoretical studies question the view that the European Commission is a preference outlier. This paper addresses this question by discussing the composition of the European College of Commissioners and by focusing on the appointment process. The analysis is based on a data set that contains biographical information for all Commissioners since 1958. The analysis highlights the importance of Commissioners' party affiliation and their previous political positions. Multivariate regression analysis shows that smaller member states have tended to send more high-ranking politicians to the College of Commissioners than have larger member states. However, party affiliation has not become more important as an appointment criterion. What has changed with time has been not the party link but the calibre of positions held by Commissioners before they are appointed to the College.

### KEY WORDS

- appointment
- delegation
- European Commission
- party politics

## Introduction

The European Commission is a central political actor in the political system of the European Union (EU). It holds the monopoly to initiate legislation and can bring charges against member states before the European Court of Justice. As the bureaucracy in charge of initiating legislation, it often enjoys informational advantages vis-à-vis the member states. For a long time, the Commission has been seen as a major driving force behind further integration. However, given that member states appoint the members of the Commission, its degree of autonomy has remained controversial. Is the European Commission really a preference outlier?

Many studies contend that it is. In quite a few scholarly accounts, the Commission is pictured as being much more in favour of further integration and more liberal economically than the member states. Contrary to these arguments, Hug (2003) and Crombez (1997) have doubted that substantial differences can persist between the political preferences of the Commission and the member states. By using the mechanisms of appointment and by determining the extent of delegation, member states can keep the Commission effectively under control (see also Pollack, 2003).

But do the member states really use the appointment of new Commissioners to exercise control over the Commission? To shed more light on this question, we have to gain a better empirical understanding of the composition of the College of Commissioners. What are the criteria upon which Commissioners are chosen? Does the College of Commissioners' composition reflect the distribution of preferences in the Council? Once we understand the mechanisms behind appointments to the Commission, we can better distinguish whether bureaucratic drift is in fact the result of the composition of the College or is caused by other processes.

Despite the considerable interest in the composition of the College of Commissioners, few empirical studies have been conducted on it. Hooghe (2001) analysed the factors that influence the preferences of high Commission officials. MacMullen (1997) was the first to provide biographical information on all Commissioners. Wonka (2004) linked the biographical information about Commissioners' previous careers to theoretical questions, as raised in the principal-agent literature. He questioned the extent to which member states use the appointment of Commissioners as a control device and contended that member states can control the College of Commissioners quite effectively via the appointment of loyal party members.

Valuable as these empirical studies are, several questions have remained unanswered concerning the relationship between the political preferences of EU member states and those of the Commissioners. One way to shed more

light on the preferences of Commissioners is to determine the party linkage of member states and the College of Commissioners. In this respect, two questions are of particular theoretical importance: First, to what extent does the party affiliation of Commissioners match the party composition of the appointing government? Second, to what extent is the increase of the Commission's political importance reflected in the patterns of appointment to the College of Commissioners? The following empirical analysis will answer both questions.

My study contributes to the existing literature in several respects. Unlike previous studies, I account systematically for the differences between large and small member states regarding delegation to the College of Commissioners. Moreover, drawing on a new indicator that captures the relative political importance of a prior political position – from state secretary to prime minister – I am able to observe changes in the relative political importance of appointed Commissioners. With this indicator I can analyse whether member states have sent more high-ranking politicians to the College of Commissioners in Brussels over time.

My analysis shows that, counter-intuitively, party affiliation has not grown in importance as an appointment criterion. Instead, a stronger party political alignment between member state governments and the College of Commissioners is the by-product of a reduction in the number of Commissioners that larger member states can send to Brussels. However, member states have increasingly appointed more important high-ranking politicians as Commissioners, as is shown by the political position previously held by each. In addition, the analysis shows that large and small member states differ substantially in their appointment patterns.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first part, I discuss different theoretical perspectives on the role of the Commission and derive empirical implications from this literature. Second, I present my empirical analysis of the composition of the College of Commissioners and discuss the results. I conclude by discussing my findings against the background of the theoretical debate on delegation in the European Union.

## **The European Commission**

### **The Commission's position in the European Union**

Rational choice institutionalists have always claimed that the Commission plays an important role in EU policy-making (Steunenberg, 1994; Crombez, 1996). Contributions have focused on the ability of the Commission to

influence legislation through agenda-setting. Three periods are usually distinguished to highlight the power of the Commission in the political system of the EU. In the first period after the Treaty of Rome, the Commission's power was limited. With the Single European Act (SEA), the Commission's agenda-setting power gained in importance, but it was somewhat reduced by the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, which introduced the co-decision procedure (see Tsebelis and Garrett, 2001: 359). Given that the Commission has the right to initiate legislation, it can use this power to shape the legislative agenda.

However, the empirical studies on European law-making have focused instead on the conditional agenda-setting power of the European Parliament (EP) in the wake of George Tsebelis's prominent article (1994). It was his provocative claim that shaped the agenda for empirical research. Therefore, more quantitative research has focused on the EP's ability to act as an agenda-setter than on the Commission's role in the legislative process (see e.g. Tsebelis et al., 2001). It seems as if the Commission's important role in the legislative process has been taken for granted as being rather uncontroversial.

Surprisingly little is known about the systematic differences in the interests of the Commission and the member states over longer periods of time. Most studies simply assume that the Commission and the EP have a much more pro-European agenda than the member states in the Council. This assumption would appear even more relevant given that critics have pointed out the possibility of the Commission being even more powerful than the agenda-setting models stipulate. For instance, Schmidt (2000) argues that the Commission not only may be able to choose the policy it prefers among the positions of the member states but also might be able to change the preferences of a member state by threatening to charge it with a treaty violation that would burden it with costly penalties. In addition, information asymmetries provide the Commission with more bargaining leverage, because it can put pressure upon member states in its role as the guardian of the treaties.

The emphasis on information asymmetries comes close to neo-functional accounts. From this perspective, high levels of uncertainty provide an advantage for the Commission in EU legislation. Furthermore, in neo-functional accounts the European Commission has more than formal agenda-setting power. Here the Commission forms alliances with interest groups to support policies that bolster further integration (Burley and Mattli, 1993: 54). It is the central role of the Commission and its detailed knowledge of the treaties that place it in a more advantageous position vis-à-vis the member states.

To sum up, the various theoretical approaches to European integration agree that the European Commission plays a critical role in the political

system of the EU, even though they differ in explaining how and why this is so. For example, rational choice models of EU legislation emphasize the formal agenda-setting power of the Commission after the SEA. According to this view, the Commission's role had been rather limited before this act. However, scholars in the neo-functionalist tradition emphasize the central role of the Commission as a motor of integration. Both approaches agree that the political importance of the Commission has substantially increased over time.

This increase in importance should also be mirrored in the assignment of the Commissioners, but how? Is it reflected in the higher status of the politicians appointed to the College of Commissioners or in a closer party alignment between Commissioners and the appointing governments? Before I address these questions, I will briefly discuss the relevant dimensions of conflict in the political system of the European Union.

### **Dimensions of conflict in European politics**

What are the issue dimensions relevant for EU politics? There is a consensus concerning the basic dimensions of political conflict in European politics. The literature usually distinguishes between the left/right and the integration/sovereignty dimensions. These two dimensions have been shown to be relevant both for political parties in Europe and for the party groups in the European Parliament (see Ray, 1999; Gabel and Hix, 2002).

The extent to which the left/right divide determines decision-making in the European Union has been analysed in a new wave of research. Hix et al. (2005) show that left/right is a main explanatory variable for party group coalitions in the European Parliament. Mattila (2004) provides evidence for the salience of the left/right divide in the Council. Franchino (2007) has offered the most extensive study of the party dynamics of European integration to date. He analyses decision-making in the EU by comparing the party positions of the Council and the Commission on the left/right and integration/sovereignty dimensions for the past five decades.

Although the study of party conflicts in the EU has recently become one of the liveliest debates, almost nothing is known about party conflict in the College of Commissioners. Understanding the party dynamics of the appointment process may constitute a valuable first step. Is the political location of a member state government mirrored in the Commission? In other words, are Commissioners chosen on the basis of their political affiliation? We would expect party affiliation to be an important selection criterion for Commissioners. Yet, as we know, co-optation of the (major) opposition party by granting it one of the two Commissioners has often been used as a strategy to broaden support for EU policies and to remove the EU issue from domestic

politics in the larger member states. Therefore, the empirical question is whether the average political position of the Commission is closer to the position taken by the member state parliaments or by member state governments. A more coherent understanding of the political dynamics influencing the appointment of Commissioners will contribute significantly to our general understanding of party conflict in the EU. It will allow us to better distinguish between different sources of bureaucratic drift, which I shall address now.

### **Delegation to appointed agents**

Pollack (2003: 103–7) argues that the Commission serves functions that enhance the interest of EU member states. Treaty-based delegation has been created to increase the credibility of the member state commitment to their EU obligations. In particular, the substantial competence of the Commission to bring infringement proceedings against non-compliant member states highlights the Commission's role as a guardian of the treaties. In addition to asking why certain functions are delegated to the Commission, Pollack also answers the question about the way in which the Commission is monitored by the member states. In this context, comitology is perceived as a police patrol mechanism, with which the member states monitor the Commission's activities (see also Franchino, 2000).

Besides comitology, Pollack (2003: 111–14) claims that member states also monitor the Commission via appointments to it, particularly of the Commission President. He claims that the appointment process is one of the major mechanisms through which member states can influence the decision-making of the Commission. He emphasizes that the member states are in full control of the nomination and re-nomination of their Commissioners. Only lately has the role of the European Parliament in the appointment process been strengthened. Pollack highlights the fact that Commissioners are re-appointed by their home countries or pursue a career in the domestic politics of their homelands after having served on the Commission.

There have been attempts to clarify the relationship between the Council and the Commission with the help of formal models. Crombez (1997: 7) predicts that the policy preferences of a Commissioner should be similar to the preferences of his or her domestic government. The main insight provided by his model is that member states will appoint only those Commissioners who are likely to initiate legislation that will find support in the Council.

Often the Commission is seen as a preference outlier that is much more in favour of European integration than are the member states in the Council. Drawing on Crombez, Hug (2003: 51) has taken issue with this common assumption in the EU literature. He argues that, in the light of principal-agent

theory, it is rather doubtful whether a major divide exists between the Council and the Commission. Two arguments suggest that the Commission should have preferences similar or close to those of the member states. First, since a principal (here the member states) appoints an agent (the College of Commissioners), the preferences of the two should be related. Second, if there were a major divergence between a principal and its agent, the principal should be hesitant to delegate to the agent. Therefore, we should expect the Commission to have preferences similar to those of the Council through two mechanisms of control: the appointment process and the design of delegation.

To test these hypotheses empirically and to understand better what accounts for bureaucratic drift, we have to focus on these two mechanisms. On the one hand, we have to find out whether the member states do in fact use the appointment of Commissioners as a means of control. To answer this question, we need more information on the patterns of delegation to the College. On the other hand, we have to find out whether Commissioners' decisions reflect the preferences of the governments that appointed them. Authors drawing strongly on organizational theory would say they do not. Egeberg (2006), for example, theorizes about Commissioners' behaviour and identifies multiple roles that influence their decisions. Among the four roles he suggests – Commission role, portfolio role, country role and party role – only the last two can be easily manipulated by member states when they nominate a new Commissioner.

To sum up, my theoretical discussion has been an attempt to understand how the interests of the Council and the Commission differ by looking at the appointment process and the Commission's decision-making. There is a lively debate on the degree to which the Commission's actions reflect member states' interests. To understand better how these interests are interrelated we have to find out how greatly the party political compositions of the Council and the Commission differ. In the empirical section, I shall show that member states use the appointment of Commissioners to delegate officials with similar profiles to that of the domestic government.

## **Determinants of selection**

### **Empirical studies of Commission preferences**

What do we know about the Commission's preferences so far? Liesbet Hooghe's work (2001) has substantially enhanced our understanding of the European Commission. In her detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of the preferences of top Commission officials, Hooghe has shown which kinds of factor shape the preferences. In her view, the Commission officials



are influenced by the length of their previous national administrative experience, the length of their work in the Commission, their party affiliation and the position of their home country in the EU. As Hooghe argues, the experience in the home country crucially shapes an official's views.

Other studies have explicitly focused on the composition of the College of Commissioners. MacMullen (1997) was – to the best of my knowledge – the first to collect information on all Commissioners. In his study, he focused on biographical aspects of the Commissioners such as age, gender and education. MacMullen provides detailed summaries in which he shows how biographical characteristics differ among Commissioners and indicates patterns over time. The relation between Commission and Council preferences, however, was not of particular interest for this study. Magnette (2005: 80) demonstrates that the College of Commissioners has become more political over time. Although he offers no information about the absolute number, he shows an increase within the last 10–15 years in the number of Commissioners who held high political positions before their promotion to the Commission.

A quantitative analysis of the College of Commissioners focusing on theoretical questions has been provided by Wonka (2004). He is the first to have studied the patterns on which the selection of European Commissioners is based. Wonka is particularly interested to know how relevant party membership is for the assignment of new Commissioners. In addition, he tries to assess how much more frequently the Commissioners have been politicians rather than bureaucrats. Wonka, like Hix (2005: 44–6), shows that over time most of the Commissioners held political positions rather than strictly administrative ones before they entered the Commission.

MacMullen and Wonka have made important contributions to an understudied aspect of the European Commission. My paper goes beyond their analyses in several respects. First, my data set contains information on the importance of the previous positions of European Commissioners so that I can distinguish between the relative calibre of these positions. Second, using multivariate statistics, I can better determine how much the importance of party membership has increased and whether member states apply different appointment strategies. In particular, controlling for incumbency, I can better assess whether party affiliation has really become a more important appointment criterion over time. Before starting the empirical analysis, I will briefly summarize the hypothesis to be tested.

### **Delegation to the Commission**

If the relationship between member states and the Commission is perceived to be a principal–agent game, we should expect that the principals (the

member states) appoint agents (the Commissioners) with similar preferences. Given that party affiliation is a good indicator of the ideological position of a future Commissioner, it should be a relevant factor in the appointment process. In other words, governments that want to ensure that their interests are represented in the Commission should be more likely to nominate their own party members as Commissioners.

**H1:** Commissioners are most likely to be members of parties that form the domestic government at the time of appointment.

As discussed above, the practical and political importance of EU policies has risen sharply over time. Most of the literature on legislation in the EU has focused on the period after the SEA in 1987. This treaty gave the Commission substantial agenda-setting power. This power was reduced by the treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, but since the 1950s the Commission's role in the legislative process of the EU has become more important overall. This leads to two further implications:

**H2a:** The congruence between the party affiliation of appointed Commissioners and the party composition of the national governments should have become stronger over time.

**H2b:** Countries have increasingly sent high-ranking politicians to Brussels; or the political importance of Commissioners' prior position has increased over time.

The literature also suggests that the interests of small member states differ from those of large member states (see Pollack, 2001: 224). Small states rely on international institutions for a 'voice', and international institutions are a more efficient means for small states to express their interest than they are for large states. Differences of interest evolve either from different positions in the world economy or from the more limited state capacities of smaller states. For the European Union, Thorhallsson has argued explicitly that small states relate to the Commission differently from large states: '[D]ue to the limited capacity of the administration of the smaller states, they rely more upon the Commission to get their proposals through the Council' (Thorhallsson, 2000: 114).

There is an institutional explanation that points in the same direction. Until the Nice Treaty, bigger member states were allotted two Commissioners. Starting with the Barroso Commission, only one Commissioner now represents every member state. This institutional feature may have generated different delegation patterns between small and large member states. Since small member states used to have only one seat in the College, they had less leverage to ensure that their interests were represented. Therefore, small states' governments should have an even stronger incentive to align their interests with those of their Commissioners. The following implications can be derived from these arguments.

**H3a:** Small EU member states are more likely to send Commissioners with an affiliation to the party in government.

**H3b:** Commissioners from smaller member states have held higher political office at home than have Commissioners from larger member states.

I test these hypotheses with a data set that provides information on the previous position of all Commissioners and their party affiliation. In the next section I discuss the data, introduce the methods I have chosen and present my empirical results.

## Empirical analysis

### Data

My data set contains information on all members of the College of Commissioners since 1958. Each Commissioner in every Commission is coded as one observation ( $N = 218$ ). For five Commissioners biographical information was not available and for a few Commissioners information about their party affiliation was lacking. My criterion for differentiating between small and large member states is how many Commissioners the country is allowed to send to the Commission. Small states are the ones with only one Commissioner. The member states with two seats in the Commission – France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom – are considered to be large member states.<sup>1</sup> Time is measured in years from 1958, when the first Hallstein Commission came into office. I also include a variable that indicates whether a Commissioner is an incumbent and therefore was a member of the previous Commission.

I use three different variables to measure the dimensions of change in the composition of the Commission. First, I use an indicator that provides information about the political importance of the highest position a Commissioner held before he or she was appointed (cf. Druckman and Warwick, 2005). Second, I use a variable that simply codes whether a Commissioner held a political position before he or she entered the College of Commissioners. Former positions like MP, MEP, junior ministers, ministers, and important positions within a party are coded as being political ones. Third, I include party affiliation as an additional variable. Let me describe these variables in some more detail, starting with this last one.

The party affiliation was easily determined for most of the Commissioners. Some Commissioners were not formal party members but had strong connections to one party in their previous career. Other Commissioners pursued a more independent political career. These were usually

diplomats, administrators or policy experts. In the context of this paper, it is of interest which party was in government at the time the Commissioner was assigned. I distinguish three scenarios: first, a Commissioner has a strong party connection and is affiliated with a party in government at the time he or she takes office in the College of Commissioners; second, a Commissioner has an affiliation with a national party that is presently in opposition; third, the Commissioner has no direct party affiliation.

It is more difficult to account for the political importance of the position that a given Commissioner held before he or she was nominated. Indexes that have been developed within comparative politics can help assess the importance of political positions. For example, researchers have been interested in the way different ministries are divided among coalition partners. One way to assess the political importance of government offices has been the use of expert surveys. Two approaches figure prominently in the literature. Laver and Hunt (1992: 105) use a ranking based on the importance of different ministries. Experts were asked to rank portfolios according to their importance, but without an underlying scale. The results from this survey show that in almost all countries 'finance' and 'foreign affairs' are considered the two most important portfolios. Recently, Druckman and Warwick (2005) also conducted an expert survey to evaluate the importance of portfolios for West European countries. Unlike Laver and Hunt, they asked country experts to base their evaluation on a scale provided in the survey. The logic of the scale is described by the authors in the following way:

In order to obtain interval-level ratings of these posts, we provided our respondents with an anchor by asking them to apply a score of 1 to all posts whose importance they believed equalled the 'average' or 'normal' portfolio. They were then instructed that any post that is above average should receive a score above 1 that would reflect just how much more important it is than an average portfolio (e.g., a score of 1.5 would indicate that the post is 50 per cent above average). Likewise, any below-average post would receive a proportional score of less than 1 (Druckman and Warwick, 2005: 23).

I use the data set provided by Druckman and Warwick to compare the previous position of Commissioners across countries and time. I took the highest position that a person had reached in his or her career before he or she entered the Commission and assigned to it the score for that position in Druckman and Warwick's scale. Unfortunately, the Druckman and Warwick data set does not provide information for all member states or for all positions relevant to my context. Where values were unavailable, I assigned values to positions. One might have additional reservations concerning the use of the Druckman and Warwick data. The survey, conducted from 2000 to 2002, reports only one score for a ministry's importance, even though the

relevance of some ministries might have changed significantly over time. In addition, cross-sectional comparability might be limited since experts may apply different definitions of an average position. Still, it is the best source available and, since information about the importance of Commissioners' previous positions is crucial for a better understanding of delegation within the EU, I make use of the Druckman and Warwick data in my subsequent analysis.

**Descriptive analysis**

Let me start with some descriptive statistics. Table 1 provides information about the party affiliation of Commissioners. Immediately we observe a strong difference between Commissioners from small and large member states. Although we find Commissioners who belong to parties both in office and in opposition, some patterns emerge. First of all, small states have a significantly higher percentage of Commissioners from governing parties than from opposition parties. If we control for the incumbent status of a Commissioner, we find that almost all Commissioners from small member states who belong to a domestic opposition party have been incumbents. In fact, only one non-incumbent Commissioner from a small state was identified as belonging to an opposition party – the first Finnish Commissioner, Erkki Antero Liikanen.

However, several small states have sent Commissioners with no party affiliation. For example, Luxembourg and Denmark have always sent either members of the governing parties or persons with no party connection. Greece and Portugal have sent only Commissioners with an affiliation to the governing party. In general it seems as if the pattern has changed over time. In the latest Commissions, almost no Commissioner of a small state had an affiliation with an opposition party. This finding supports the expectation that small states in particular will want to secure the preference alignment between the domestic principal and the European agents in the Commission.

**Table 1** Party affiliation of Commissioners

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Large states</i>		<i>Small states</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Incumbents</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Incumbents</i>	
Government	69	(33)	85	(22)	154
Opposition	31	(10)	7	(6)	38
None	8	(4)	8	(4)	16

The picture looks different when we analyse large member states. Here, no general pattern emerges, although some trends and tendencies can be depicted. Britain and Spain, for example, have always filled their two Commission seats with one Commissioner from each of the two main parties, Conservative/Labour and Partido Popular/Socialists, respectively. Germany has usually sent Commissioners who were affiliated with one of the governing parties, but never a Commissioner without any party affiliation. For France and Italy, no patterns can be found by simple data inspection. All in all, the difference between small – one Commissioner – and large member states is striking. Larger members sent opposition members much more often. For the smaller members, almost all of the Commissioners with an affiliation to an opposition party had been incumbents (see below for the multivariate confirmation of this finding).

To assess the relative political importance of the previous position of an EU Commissioner, I make use of a new data set that provides us with a continuous measure for portfolio importance (see Druckman and Warwick, 2005). I use the Commission Presidents to demonstrate how positions are translated into ‘importance scores’ and thereby help explain better the measure applied here. Table 2 shows the highest previous position held by

**Table 2** Prior positions of Commission Presidents

<i>Year</i>	<i>President</i>	<i>Highest prior position</i>	<i>Score<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Average<sup>b</sup></i>
1958	Walter Hallstein (D)	Junior minister	0.84	0.55
1962	Hallstein II	(Foreign affairs)		0.62
1967	Jean Rey (B)	Minister of economic affairs	1.02	0.53
1970	Franco Maria Malfatti (I)	Minister of state participation in industry	1.18	0.52
1972	Sicco Mansholt (NL)	Minister of agriculture	0.74	–
1973	Francis-Xavier Ortoli (F)	Minister of economy and finance	1.92	0.68
1977	Roy Jenkins (UK)	Chancellor of the Exchequer	1.64	0.84
1981	Gaston Thorn (L)	Prime minister	2.17	0.95
1985	Jacques Delors (F)	Minister of economy	1.92	0.80
1989	Delors II	and defence		1.00
1993	Delors III			1.01
1995	Jacques Santer (L)	Prime minister	2.75	1.07
2000	Romano Prodi (I)	Prime minister	2.48	0.94
2004	Jose Manuel Barroso (P)	Prime minister	2.20	1.23

*Sources:* Munzinger archive and Druckman and Warwick (2005).

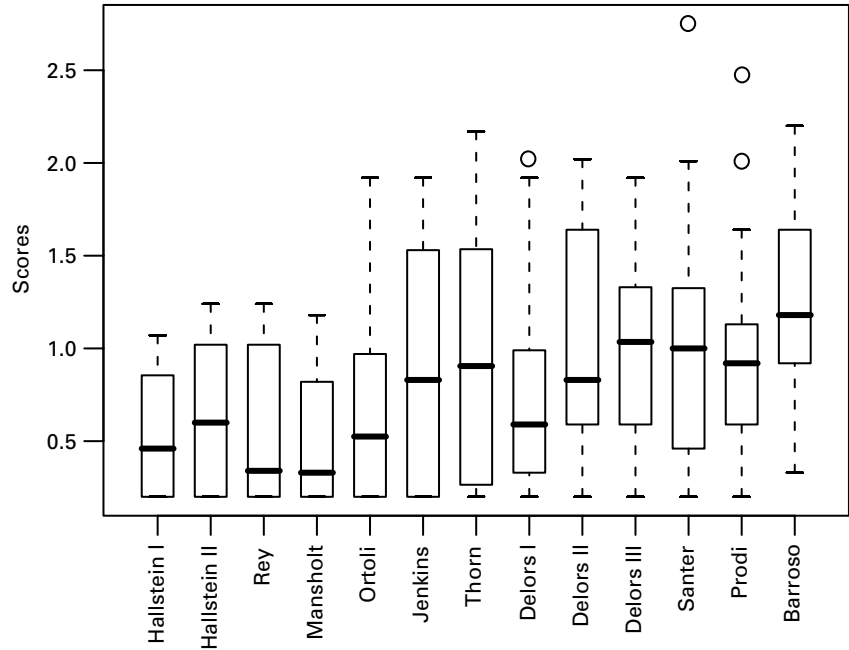
<sup>a</sup> Position score for Commission President's highest prior position.

<sup>b</sup> Average position score of all Commissioners in Commission.

each Commission President. In addition, it shows the score assigned to these positions and the average position score of the Commission headed by the respective President. Keeping in mind that this scale of portfolio importance might provide us with a rough and basic measure only, we still can use this scale to depict trends and tendencies.

Table 2 suggests that there has been a substantial increase in the importance of the previous political positions held by Commission Presidents. Whereas the first President had formerly been a junior minister, subsequent Presidents had held a ministerial portfolio, often for the most important national ministries. Lately, Commission Presidents have been former prime ministers. In addition, all Commission Presidents were members of a party that was in government in their home country.<sup>2</sup>

This observation is in line with the expectation that the heightened importance of the Commission should be reflected in the importance of Commissioners' previous positions. The box plot in Figure 1 provides additional support for this hypothesis. It shows that the importance of the previous positions of Commissioners has increased over time. Both the median of the position scores and the highest position held by a



**Figure 1** Box plot of former positions (scores) of Commissioners.

Commissioner have risen. In addition, we see that the frequency of Commissioners in the lowest quartile has dropped. Commissioners with no previous political experience are given a score of 0.2, and Figure 1 shows that this group provided a significant number of Commissioners in the early years. The Barroso Commission, in contrast, has no member from this group.

The data clearly confirm our expectation. An increasing importance of the Commission is reflected in more powerful political actors delegated to the College of Commissioners over time. To analyse this link further, I continue with a multivariate analysis that enables me to control for additional factors such as incumbency and national background.

### **Multivariate analysis**

In studying the changing composition of the Commission, I use three different indicators: first, the highest position held by a Commissioner – in other words, the position score; second, whether he or she had been in a political position before; and, third, the person's party affiliation at the time he or she was appointed to the Commission. Methodologically, these three variables are of different types and require different multivariate models. Party affiliation is coded as a categorical variable and has to be analysed with a multinomial logit model. Whether a Commissioner has held a political position before is coded through a dummy variable and analysed with a logit model. An ordinary least squares (OLS) model is used to analyse the position scores of the Commissioners. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 3. I present a more in-depth discussion of these models in the following sections.

To find out how the factors that I have discussed – incumbency and country size – are interrelated with other factors, I present the results of a multivariate analysis. Based on the three categories for party affiliation – member of government party, opposition member, no party affiliation – I conducted a multinomial logit regression in which each category is compared with a reference group.

Model 1 of Table 3 presents the results of this analysis. It indicates that there is in fact a strong difference between EU members with only one representative in the College of Commissioners and large member states with two Commission members. Commissioners with an affiliation to a domestic party in the opposition are less likely to be from smaller states. The results show also that, contrary to the theoretical expectations, Commissioners are not more likely to be members of governing parties over time. There is some evidence that the number of Commissioners with no party affiliation has decreased.

To shed more light on the political dimension of a Commissioner's previous career, I conducted a further analysis. I divided all Commissioners



**Table 3** Determinants of party affiliation and previous positions of Commissioners

	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
GLM – Model	Multinomial logit <sup>a</sup>		Logit <sup>b</sup>	OLS
Dependent variable	Opposition party <sup>c</sup>	No party	Political position	Position score <sup>d</sup>
Years since 1958	0.012 (0.78)	–0.039 (1.95)*	1.067 (4.25)***	0.011 (3.72)***
Incumbent Commissioner	–0.656 (1.44)	0.151 (0.20)	0.697 (0.93)	–0.091 (–1.18)
Country with one seat	–3.711 (3.52)***	–0.211 (0.28)	3.259 (2.65)***	0.332 (4.20)***
One seat and incumbent	3.528 (2.94)***	0.786 (0.73)		
Constant	–0.829 (1.77)*	–1.430 (2.27)**		0.473 (5.21)***
<i>N</i>	208		213	213
Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	36.41		37.01	
Pseudo- <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> (McFadden)	0.12		0.18	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>				0.19

Sources: Munzinger archive and LexisNexis for biographical information of commissioners.

Software: Stata 9.2 and R 2.3.

Notes: Absolute value of z-statistics (logit models) and t-statistics (OLS) in parentheses.

<sup>a</sup> Reference category: Commissioners who were affiliated with a party in government.

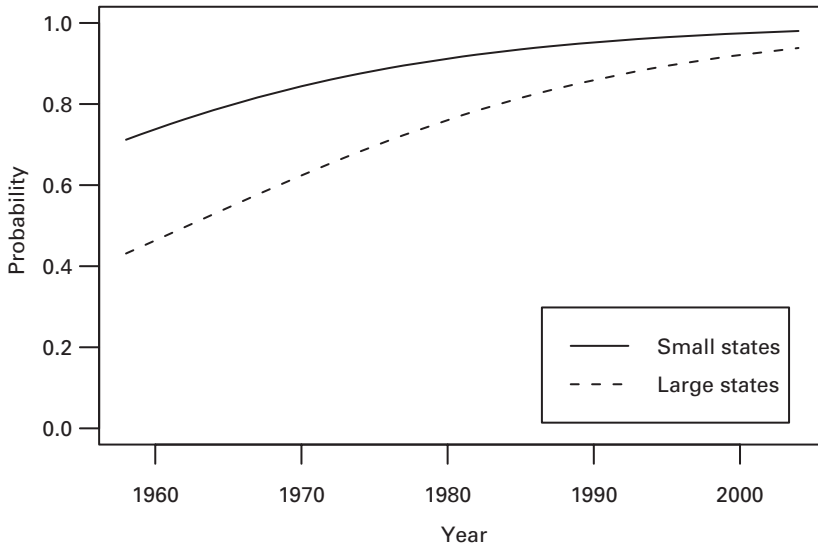
<sup>b</sup> Odds ratios shown; reference category: Commissioners that held no political position before.

<sup>c</sup> Government status of Commissioner's party from Woldendorp et al. (2000).

<sup>d</sup> Source: Druckman and Warwick (2005).

\*\*\* significant at 1%; \*\* significant at 5%; \* significant at 10%.

into two groups – politicians and Commissioners who had held no previous political positions. This variable separates politicians from Commissioners who previously had neither parliamentary nor ministerial positions and therefore no politically relevant positions. Model 2 of Table 3 displays the results of the logit analysis. It can be seen that Commissioners have been less likely to be in non-political positions over time. To illustrate the result of the logit analysis I have calculated the predicted values over time.<sup>3</sup> Figure 2 shows the results of this analysis. The figure illustrates that the probability that a Commissioner was in a political position before he or she took office in Brussels has increased sharply over time. In addition, the model predicts that almost half of the early Commissioners had never before held a political position. The graph also reveals a significant difference, decreasing over time, between small and large member states.



**Figure 2** Predicted probability of having a political position.

For small member states, the results confirm insights gained from the descriptive data analysis. First, if a Commissioner is a member of a domestic opposition party, he or she is most likely to have once been a member of the Commission. Second, the number of Commissioners with no party affiliation has decreased over time. The multivariate analysis also shows almost no changes in the party affiliation of Commissioners over time with respect to government/opposition status. Contrary to an often held view in the literature, Commissioners are not more likely to be government party members over time. This latter finding contradicts some of the expectations I raised in the first part of the paper.

The effect of the finding changed through the institutional reform of the College of Commissioners in the Nice Treaty. Now every member state has one seat in the College of Commissioners. Given that countries with only one seat in the College delegate politicians from the governing parties as Commissioners, we find a closer similarity between the parties in the Council and those in the College of Commissioners.

Let me now turn to an analysis of the calibre of previous positions. The advantage of measuring the significance of previous positions as discussed above is that it provides a continuous scale with which to compare different positions held by Commissioners before they entered the Commission. In the analysis, I determine the influence of time and nation size on a country's

delegation behaviour with the help of an OLS regression.<sup>4</sup> The increased importance of the Commission should be reflected in the fact that persons with higher political positions take office over time. In addition, I expect that especially small states have a strong interest in the European Commission. Therefore, they should send persons who have held higher political positions than those previously held by Commissioners from larger member states.

The results of the analysis are presented in Model 3 of Table 3. Generally, they confirm the implications drawn from the delegation literature. Some further discussion helps to clarify the implications of these results and the general performance of the model. To understand the results, we should keep in mind that the scale measuring the importance of previous positions can be divided into four categories. The highest category consists of former prime ministers and the most important national portfolios, the second category of average ministers, the third category of junior ministers and less important ministries, and the last category of almost all other, primarily non-governmental, positions (MPs, diplomats, policy experts, etc.). Given that each of these categories consists of a range of about 0.4, we can infer from the regression results that the Commissioners' previous positions have shifted from those of former junior ministers and non-governmental positions – especially diplomats – to those of governmental experience in average ministries.

Looking at the results of the regression analysis, we are surprised to see how significantly more high-profile politicians have been assigned as Commissioners by smaller member states. It is not so much the finding as such but the strength of the finding that catches our attention. Again considering the data in categorical terms, we note that, on average, smaller member states have delegated Commissioners one category above larger member states. More precisely, the data show us that larger member states were still sending junior ministers and MPs at a time when smaller member states were already sending former ministers to the Commission.

To sum up, the finding that the importance of delegates to the College of Commissioners has increased over time reflects the more important role of the Commission. More surprising is the fact that small states seem to delegate persons with a significantly higher profile than do the larger member states. It is not necessarily surprising that this is statistically significant, but it is more surprising with respect to the scope of this influence.

## Conclusion

Commissioners are usually members of governing parties, and the increased importance of the Commission over time is reflected in the previous positions of EU Commissioners. Contrary to the arguments discussed in the

theoretical section of this article, it cannot be statistically shown that the importance of a Commissioner's party affiliation has increased over time. It has been a constant pattern that most of the Commissioners are members of parties in domestic governments. As long as bigger member states delegated two Commissioners, one of them was often an opposition member. Only the number of Commissioners with no party affiliation has decreased. The increased political role of the Commission is represented in the previous positions of the Commissioners rather than in their party affiliation.

In the study, I reveal two patterns of delegation to the Commission that require more detailed investigation in the future. First, why do appointment strategies vary so significantly between small and large member states? Second, and partly related to the former, how can substantial differences in patterns of delegation among large member states be explained? The delegation behaviour of some large member states follows a principal-agent logic – these countries assign Commissioners from governing parties. In contrast, other states regularly include opposition members. These differences can hardly be explained in the light of principal-agent theory without including domestic factors. More comparative work investigating the appointment process may help to reveal these domestic factors.

Detailed knowledge of the appointment process is a first step toward a better understanding of delegation to the Commission and of possible sources of bureaucratic drift. It sheds new light on the distribution of interests between the Commission and the Council. In my view, two further steps are necessary for a more coherent understanding of bureaucratic drift. First, we have to find out how the allocation of portfolios in the Commission influences decision-making in the College. A member state government may try to guarantee its influence in the Commission not only by appointing loyal delegates but also by securing a portfolio that is of special interest to the country.<sup>5</sup> Currently, we do not know enough about the logic of portfolio allocation in the College to investigate this link further. Second, we have to find out the extent to which Commissioners' decisions reflect their domestic parties' positions or those of their home countries. What is the linkage between national governments and Commissioners after the appointment of a new Commission? A broad literature based on organizational studies claims that the link is rather weak and that bureaucratic drift results from socialization in office. On both issues – the relevance of the portfolio allocation and the actual decisions of Commissioners – we still lack a comprehensive empirical understanding that would help us to discriminate between different theoretical explanations of bureaucratic drift. Having outlined the patterns of appointment to the College of Commissioners, I hope that this study provides insights for future research on the issue.

## Notes

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- 1 In the current Barroso Commission all member states are allowed to send only one Commissioner. Neither the exclusion of the Barroso Commission from the quantitative analysis nor its inclusion affects my results.
- 2 Malfatti resigned as President in 1972 to run for office in Italy. Sicco Mansholt, previously a Vice-President, took the position for the rest of the term. At the time, the Dutch social democrats (PvDA) were not part of government in the Netherlands.
- 3 For the calculation, the incumbent status is set to 0. Therefore the predicted values on which the graph is based give probabilities for new Commissioners.
- 4 To evaluate the robustness of my analysis, I also analysed my regression results through a multinomial logit model. For this analysis I divided all previous positions into four groups and analysed how the composition changed over time. This analysis leads to the same results as the normal regression. Since the latter is easier to interpret, I present only these results here.
- 5 I owe this idea to an anonymous reader.

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### About the author

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**Holger Döring** is a doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Paulstrasse 3, 50676 Cologne, Germany.

Fax: +49 221 276 7456

E-mail: [doering@mpifg.de](mailto:doering@mpifg.de)

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